

Commencement Address at Furman University in Greenville, South
Carolina
May 31, 2008

Thank you. Thank you very much. Mr. President—President Shi, thank you for that kind introduction. Governor Sanford, Senator Graham, Congressman Inglis, members of the board of trustees, faculty, staff, members of the Furman community, parents, and most important, the class of 2008: Thank you for this kind invitation to be with you.

I congratulate the parents here who have sacrificed to make this day possible. When your child graduates from college, it is a glorious day for your family and a pretty good day for your bank account. *[Laughter]* I know the graduates will join me in thanking you for your love and support.

And I thank the members of the Furman faculty. I appreciate your devoting your career to improving the lives of young people. I know this is an institution where folks are encouraged to make their voices heard. I too am a strong believer in free speech. And to prove it, I'm about to give you one. *[Laughter]*

For 4 years, this campus has been your life. You've studied hard, and I suspect some of you may have played hard. *[Laughter]* Along the way, some of you may have wondered whether this day would ever come. Well, it's finally here, and Laura and I send our heartfelt congratulations to the class of 2008.

I'm glad to be joined with my friend and outstanding leader of South Carolina, Governor Mark Sanford, class of 1983. Governor, I'm not going to ask if you ever got caught swimming in the fountains. *[Laughter]*

As the president said, 25 years ago, the Governor sat where you now sit, as a member of the graduating class. As it happens, as he mentioned, the commencement speaker that day was my dad. Now, that means some at Furman will have heard

graduation speeches from two generations of Bushes. It's a great step forward for the Bush family and a great step backward for your English department. *[Laughter]*

And as the president mentioned, I have other family ties with Furman. In the early 1930s, a student named Willa Martin graduated from the women's college that was soon to become part of Furman. She went on to marry my mother's father. She also spent time as a columnist for the Associated Press, thus beginning the long history of warm relations between the Bush family and the media. *[Laughter]*

My administration also has another Furman connection. One of the first people I see almost every morning is a Furman grad and my Director of National Intelligence, Admiral Mike McConnell, class of 1966. I asked Mike if he ever took part in the "midnight serenade." He said, I'd like to tell you, but the information is classified. *[Laughter]*

It's a special time of your life. It's—you're going to find it's a time when you get a lot of free advice—some of it helpful, some of it not—like that one graduation speaker who urged the students to keep their ears to the ground, their shoulders to the wheel, and their noses to the grindstone. All I could think was, that's a hell of a position to be in. *[Laughter]*

I also remember what it was like to graduate from college and look out at the world before me. At the time, I must confess, the last thing on my mind was how to be a model citizen. Just ask my mother. *[Laughter]* Yet I found, as you will, the world has a way of helping you to grow. Soon many of you will be earning a living and getting married and raising families. As you move ahead in life, you will find temptations and distractions that can take you off course. You might also find that

years may pass before you learn some important truths: that who you are is more important than what you have, and that you have responsibilities to your fellow citizens, your country, your family, and yourself.

In my first speech as the Governor of Texas, I talked about the importance of a responsibility society. In my last commencement address as President, it seems a fitting subject to return to.

I'm heartened today to see that our country is seeing a resurgence of personal responsibility. I'm pleased that this resurgence is being led by many young people who are embracing bedrock values of faith and family. These are values on which Furman and many other great universities were founded. And as you leave this campus today, my call to you is this: Strengthen this rising culture of responsibility in America by serving others, contributing to our civic life, and being accountable to yourself and your families.

A culture of responsibility does mean serving others. Through the toil of generations and the grace of an Almighty, our Nation has been given a lot. And more and more Americans are recognizing our obligations to help those who have little.

One of the most uplifting trends in our country is that volunteerism is at near all-time highs. And we see this spirit here at Furman. I was impressed when I heard that nearly two-thirds of you balanced your studies this year with outreach to your community. You helped children with disabilities realize they have a place in our communities and in our hearts. You helped Habitat for Humanity give people a home of their own. Through such works of compassion, you've learned early in life that nothing is more fulfilling than putting the needs of others ahead of your own. And I thank you for what you've done for this community and for our country.

I saw the spirit of service in Greensburg, Kansas, which was destroyed by a tornado last year. In the aftermath, a Greensburg

resident simply said, "My town is gone." And it was. But after the storm receded, a wave of compassion arrived. First, family members rushed in with aid. Then folks came from nearby towns doing their duties to help their neighbors in need. And soon citizens across our country rallied to help the people of Greensburg. I recently went to Greensburg High School to deliver their commencement address, and I'm pleased to report to you, the town of Greensburg is recovering, and the spirit of determination and compassion is alive and well in America's heartland.

I've seen the spirit of service in good Americans who work to heal troubled communities across our country. Much of this good work is carried out by community and faith-based groups who lift up struggling souls one at a time. They serve in soup kitchens and help former prisoners rejoin society, inspire young people in inner-city classrooms, ensuring they have the skills they need to live lives of hope and opportunity.

I've seen the spirit of service in Americans who are changing lives on the continent of Africa. Our citizens are teaching children in Ghana, helping villagers fight malaria and HIV/AIDS in Tanzania, and helping war-ravaged people recover and rebuild in Liberia. These citizens are showing the world the true face of our country, a kind and generous nation that is meeting its responsibility to help the poor and the sick and the hungry.

I've seen the spirit of service in those who proudly wear the uniform. America is blessed to have citizens who volunteer in times of danger, and that includes some of you here today. You will leave Furman with more than a degree—[applause]—you'll leave this fine university with more than a degree; you will also receive your commission as an officer in the United States military. I thank you for making the noble decision to serve. Your country's proud of you, and so is your Commander in Chief.

To all of you, my call is to make service to others a way of life. Wherever you live, whatever you do, find a way to give back to your communities. And however you choose to serve, you're going to learn a great lesson: that the more you give, the more you'll benefit.

A culture of responsibility means contributing to our civic life. I ask you to be citizens, not spectators, and help to build a nation of virtue and character. You can strengthen our country by participating in the democratic process. In recent years, we've seen millions of people in places like Afghanistan, Iraq, and Georgia and Ukraine risk their lives for the right to cast a ballot. These courageous people should inspire us to take our votes just as seriously. I know the democratic spirit is alive in our country because there was a big vote recently. The new American Idol got about 55 million votes. *[Laughter]* I hope we see even a bigger turnout this November. For some of you, this will be your first Presidential election. I ask you to get involved in the process and do your duty and vote. By the way, if you're wondering who to vote for, the Governor and I would be happy to offer a few suggestions. *[Laughter]*

You can strengthen our country by showing fiscal discipline in your lives. It may sound funny coming from a visitor from Washington, DC, but it's important to your futures and to the future of our country. Many of you have debts from student loans. It's an investment that I expect you will find worthwhile. In the next few years, you may find it tempting to amass more debt, particularly from credit cards, on expenses that bring little long-term benefit. My advice to you is to—not to dig a financial hole that you can't get out of. Live within your means, and bear in mind that there are no shortcuts to the American Dream.

Your Furman degree will open the door to a wide variety of career options. One of the most noble paths you can take is a career in public service. I know you probably look at the debates in Washington and

in the political campaigns and conclude that public service isn't worth it. That's a mistake. I've had my fair share of critics, but no criticism can overcome the satisfaction of serving your fellow citizens and pursuing great goals for our Nation. If you choose a career in public service, maintain the highest ethical standards, bring honor to whatever position you hold, and always put the people you serve ahead of yourself.

But public service is not just politics. It can include social work and teaching and careers in the nonprofit sector. There are countless organizations across our country that devote themselves to improving the lives of others, such as the American Red Cross or Teach for America or the Boys and Girls Clubs. These groups fulfill a noble mission, and they're a vital part of the responsibility society.

Others of you will make your careers in the private sector. If you choose this path, take pride in what you do, work hard, and bring value to the enterprise you work for. And remember this: Our country needs corporate responsibility as well as personal responsibility. So if you enter the business world, be honest with your shareholders, be truthful to your consumers, and give back to the communities in which you live. And all of us have a responsibility to be good stewards of the environment.

Finally, a culture of responsibility means being accountable to your families and to yourself. I found family to be a source of great comfort and strength. When people talk about my family, they often say I inherited my dad's eyes and my mother's mouth. *[Laughter]* But I got far more from them than that. From my dad, I learned that a gentle soul can also be strong. From my mother, I saw the blessings of humor and honesty and unqualified love. And from the two of them, I got an inspiring example of how a strong marriage can carry you through any challenge. And what has carried me through the challenges in my life have been the love and support of a wonderful woman named Laura Bush.

My wish is that you find a partner in life who loves you and challenges you and comforts you and gives your life meaning. And if you have the blessings of becoming a parent, I would like for you to remember that the most important job you will ever have is to love your child with all your heart.

In life, there's going to be many temptations to distract you from your responsibilities. Popular culture can give you the impression that alcohol, drugs, or promiscuity can lead to fulfillment in life. It's an illusion, and I urge you to reject it.

If you do fall short, know that it is never too late to recover and get back on the right track. There was a time in my life when alcohol competed for my affections, but I found salvation in my family and my faith. There's no shame in recognizing your failings or getting help if you need it. Tragedy comes when we fail to take responsibility for our weaknesses and surrender to them.

Finally, you probably don't realize it, but you're role models for others in your life, whether it's a little brother or sister who looks up to you or someone else who admires you. Positive role models are greatly needed in this society. And I urge you to set a hopeful example by leading lives of character and integrity. And if you do, you'll be proud of who you are; you'll teach others around you that a life of responsibility leads to a life of fulfillment.

In all these ways, your generation has an opportunity to show how timeless values can be applied in a modern world. And as you do so, history offers noble examples to follow, including many from right here

in South Carolina. From this State came a signer of the Declaration of Independence who lost his fortune fighting for our freedom, but never regretted the fight. From this State came the brave colonel who drew a line in the sand against oppressive rule at the old Spanish mission called the Alamo. And from this State came the child of slaves who was among the first black women to be an adviser to Presidents.

And from this State came a young man who went off to serve his country in World War II. His last name was Smith, and it happens his first name was Furman. Private Furman Smith, he never attended this school, but he grew up right down the road. While on duty in Italy, Private Smith's unit came under heavy fire. He fended off 80 enemy soldiers to defend his wounded buddies. He died at the age of 19, with his rifle still clutched in his hand. For the acts of courage and character that cost him his life, Furman Smith was awarded the Medal of Honor. Sixty-four years ago this very day, that young man carried the Furman name into history. And now, in a very different way, so will each of you.

May the values you learned here always guide your course. May you always make the right choices. And may you always look in the mirror and be proud of what you see.

Congratulations. God bless you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 8:09 p.m. at Paladin Stadium. In his remarks, he referred to David E. Shi, president, Furman University.

Remarks at the Ford's Theatre Gala *June 1, 2008*

Thank you all. Hal, thanks for the introduction. And I want to thank you all for

supporting Ford's Theatre. Laura and I have been coming here now for 8 years